1989: Tienanmen Square and the "China Solution" for East Germany?

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In June 1989 I had the good fortune not to be in Tienanmen Square.

Yet I had my own case of ignomy to record, on the part of the communist world, taking place on that same day, in Europe.

Walking across Victoria Square, in Warsaw, I pondered whether the elections I had just reported on there, for Australian radio, could really mean the beginning of the end for the communist bloc.

Like others I had included that possibility in my reportage, because unexpectedly the ruling communist party had just been defeated.

I was curious to see what kind of prominence the story would attain -- and I was about to receive a large shock.

In the international media centre just off Victoria Square, the cable television was screening images from another square, across the world, where soldiers had been killing young students and tanks were still rolling out among the crowds.

It also happened that the Ayatollah Khomeini had died in Teheran, bringing about horrendous demonstrations of emotion, and a train carrying fuel oil had exploded in Russia with immense loss of life.

The elections in Poland indeed turned out to be the beginning of the end for communism in Europe, but that realisation, and the story about it, would still have to wait for a short time.

In negotiations with the popular opposition, the Polish communists had obtained a block of reserved parliamentary seats, a “head start”, but had failed to win even the three openly contested seats they needed to form a majority.

It became apparent, over some days, that the Gorbachev government in Moscow was definitely resolved not to block a hand-over of power in Warsaw; word of that spread everywhere in Eastern Europe, and a chain reaction of public protest ensued.

Within five months, I saw the opening of the Berlin Wall, making it virtually all over for the “Bloc” except for the shouting and warm embraces on the shattered edifice itself.

Yet, the memory of that other event, across the globe at that other famous city environ, in Beijing, was very fresh.

In fact the shadow of Tienanmen Square had been hanging over the denouement of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc at its very centre, in East Berlin.

At the beginning of October hundreds of foreign journalists, myself included, had been admitted to East Germany for fortieth anniversary celebrations of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

In that lead-up to truly unexpected events, another visit to East Berlin, that of the Deputy Prime Minister of China, Yao Yulin, was seen as a harbinger of perhaps a very bad outcome.

It was not Western news media on their own which began public speculation that the GDR, amongst the most rigid of post-Stalinist regimes, would attempt to save itself through a “Tienanmen Square solution”.

Much concern about that arose from threats made by the regime itself, and it had a receptive audience among the visiting journalists, because many of them had actually been in the Chinese capital on that fateful night, not so long before.

Dissident leaders in East Berlin associated with the Protestant Church had passed on to correspondents, that they’d been told by a senior government official to “remember China”.

Whether a realistic threat or a bluff to discourage protest, it was inflammatory, and there was more to come.

The State President, Erich Honecker, referred to the June events in Beijing while hosting a function for Deputy Premier Yao.

His wife, Margot Honecker, a Minister, referred to an armed workers’ militia, ready, she said, to defend the revolution. (That armed formation, it transpired, had been much wound down over the years).

The weekend fortieth anniversary celebrations broke down into a welter of street protests, and mass arrests, in front of the guest of honour, Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Soviet leader affirmed at the time that he had heard the crowds calling “Gorby save us”; an experience that must have had an unpleasantly familiar ring, as he had been at Beijing, and was made into the focus of the protests there too.

In the GDR, attention after that riotous weekend of “Gorby” protests shifted to the growing demonstrations originating each Monday night at the Nicholas Church, in the city of Leipzig.

In a much-investigated incident, Honecker demanded that the protest that week be put down in an exemplary way.

Troops and police were issued with live ammunition, and authorities on the ground reported to their superiors that the crowd numbers building up were much bigger than expected.

Given that the procedure adopted at East Berlin had been to deploy large numbers of soldiers to contain and catch the protestors rather than disperse them; the situation on the street, as the night protest got under way, was potentially very volatile.

The sources for reports on the proposed crack-down were mostly communist officials, part of a divided and disintegrating state organisation.

Three writers from the New York Times News Service published what became close to a standard account, in the International Herald Tribune of 20th November 1989.

In this account, Egon Krenz as security chief travelled to Leipzig to countermand the order to shoot.

It continued: “According to Manfred Gerlach leader of the small Liberal Democratic Party, and others, a huge force of soldiers, policemen and secret agents assembled in Leipzig and was issued live ammunition. Their order was to shoot if necessary and the order had reportedly been signed by Erich Honecker.”

The report went on that Markus Wolf, the retired head of East Germany’s spy agencies, had claimed there was a written order from Honecker, for a so-called “Chinese solution”. “It

could have been worse than Beijing", he was quoted as saying.

However, many in the politburo had already decided that Honecker had to go, and the Times report says that in Leipzig, Kurt Mansur, the director of the *Gewandhaus* musical theatre, with some local party officials opened urgent discussions on averting a clash.

Therefore, when thousands took to the streets of Leipzig that night the police did not interfere.

An account in The Times, by Anne McElvoy and Ian Murray, on 18th November that year, quotes Gerlach, on Honecker signing an authority to shoot, and then being defied by Krenz.

It says live ammunition was issued, and quotes a letter to the press from the Leipzig volunteer militia threatening use of firearms.

Different versions have a leading clergyman from Leipzig and one local party official joining Mansur, as a civic-minded group who got through to senior officials.

Krenz was seen to remain in Berlin, either opting to leave the matter in local hands or telephoning to inquire what was happening, too late to intervene.

Among later accounts, the former West German Chancellor Willi Brandt told the Suddeutscher Zeitung newspaper he had learned that Soviet officers prevented a bloodbath at Leipzig by persuading their German colleagues to keep their troops in barracks.

In the background to these reports, earlier international press coverage, upon his appointment as Party leader, had quoted comments by Krenz in June, supporting the brutal action taken at Tienanmen Square.

Misha Glennie in a 1999 BBC radio documentary reported that Leipzig party officials had broadcast a statement to the crowd at 5:30 pm on 9th October, calling for calm and offering

dialogue with national leaders. They testified they had then telephoned Krenz at East Berlin asking that the demonstration not be touched. He had called back, after a march had already begun, to confirm there would be no police action.

The Glennie program produces evidence that state security had been preparing to collect prisoners in a State of Emergency, but had baulked at the unexpectedly large number of protestors.

Krenz was interviewed for the program, and said that the day before the Monday protest he had already decided not to use force. It was normal practice anywhere to deploy security forces, he said, “to protect a large gathering of people”, like a football crowd; (or, presumably, an angry community wanting to overturn their government).

Honecker was removed from office shortly after the Leipzig incident.

The Monday night events at Leipzig would become a centerpiece of the story of the end of one-party rule, and the triumph of the human spirit that was demonstrated on the night of 9th November 1989, with the opening of the Berlin Wall.

The widely accepted figures on the crowd turn-out, (some of the estimates made in person by me), are as follows:

A protest by only 1200 people was broken up in September; then, on the night in question, Monday 9th October, over 6000 were in the street. After that, it was 100000 on 16th October, 300000 on 23rd October and 500000 on 6th November – three days before the final moment in the capital city.

Fear had gone from the scene; there would be no European Tienanmen Square.

A decade after the time of the Wall I interviewed a few dozen former colleagues who had taken part in the coverage of 1989.

Almost all said that the barbaric crime committed around Tienmen Square had been fresh in their minds, and so their reporting of the demonstrations had made frequent references to it, as also to the sympathetic relations between the Chinese government and the GDR.

Why didn't an atrocity happen, and what of the aftermath?

East Germany was far from isolated and with the advance of communication technologies it had become impossible for the authorities there to keep out news of what was happening around the country.

The Western television news was received throughout most of East Germany; telephone links to the West had become rather easy; even pictures shot on small amateur video cameras were being smuggled to outside television stations on a regular basis.

The mass social movement of the day was able to use mass media in declaring its aims: communist party out, free elections, open the economic system to business - and later, German reunification.

The borders with neighbouring communist states had become porous, and people were leaving for the West, en masse, through Hungary.

The fact of two Germanies was potent; it offered the border crossers a place to go in the West where they were safe and would automatically receive full rights of citizenship.

The existence of the European Community, later the EU, was also crucial.

The protest movements in all of the Eastern Bloc states very early began to list EU membership as a goal - a direct way to plug into the prosperity and living standards of Western Europe.

Members of the European Commission who visited the newly democratic states after their elections in1990 reported being taken aback by the determination of those fledgling governments to put forward applications to join.

How would the future work out after the dramatic events in those famous places: Victoria Square in Warsaw, the Nicholas Church and city boulevards of Leipzig, the Berlin Wall, and Tienanmen Square?

(One other location, Red Square in Moscow, cannot ever be overlooked. There the lessons of change could not extend to the same thorough-going democratisation as in the former satellite states, and the same level of economic help from Western Europe could not be stretched that far. Working through drawn-out periods of wholesale criminality, regional wars, and destitution of millions, Russia took nearly twenty years to begin to achieve stability -- as a major resources trader and more recently something of a resurgent military and diplomatic power).

The GDR of course became part of the Federal Republic of Germany; reunification brought benefits and problems; overwhelming majorities still aver they would never go back to the way it was.

Eastern Germany received a massive make-over of public works; where its industrial economy almost collapsed because accession to the Deutschmark, and later the Euro, sent up its production costs; it has since seen a step-by-step recovery.

Germans still speak of an unrelieved psychological stress in their country, a “Wall in the mind”, though living standards have naturally moved ahead in the East, and citizens are free to travel and work anywhere in the twenty-seven countries of the European Union.

Poland likewise has seen healthy transformations, from a run-down, corrupted, debt-ridden hulk of an industrial economy, to a system much more than on the mend.

Importantly for these countries, they share in positive changes within the framework of the EU.

Once justifiably accused of gross pollution and wastage of the environment, through their improvised drive for growth, they are affiliates today in the regulated European environmental regime.

This system is far from perfect but has set world leadership goals for this year's Copenhagen summit on climate change, and is backing those standards realistically, with regulation under democratic law.

The same kind of law governs economic management, with some of the world's more effectual standards for corporate responsibility, for example in a well-policed competition and take-overs policy, strong enough to govern the leading corporations, of Microsoft dimensions.

Countries in a precarious situation after the shocks of the economic crisis of 2008-09, are obtaining support, relief and a best chance of stabilisation through their integration with the stronger parts of Europe – all in that perilous situation together.

Very significantly for peoples of Eastern Europe once almost inured to corruption and criminality in their governments, the EU has the strictest rules of probity and good governance; never fully observed but actively pursued.

For example, in dealings with the world outside Europe, there is no concession clause for corruption and despotism. Governance standards, from product safety to human good will, are written into the rule book, to be applied to trade relations and also to partner governments in development aid.

Citizens of course have both freedom of movement and freedom of speech; they can use the Internet and all other media under most liberal principles of law; and that of course, through freedom of enterprise and commerce, works to their economic benefit.

China after Tienanmen Square has seen exponential economic growth; Europeans would applaud the benefits of that, while their industries seize the opportunity to develop ever expanding investment and trade in that part of the world.

Such growth, as in Eastern Europe too, has built up from a rather low base, in China's case to a leading position in Gross Domestic Product.

It has also brought well recognised costs: in the context of an economic drive with "cowboy capitalist" elements, a growing wealth gap between major sectors of the public, now as indecent as anywhere in the world; and relentless, worsening stress on the environment, which is harrowing for the entire world.

China in the debate over carbon emissions and global warming is in the position of its fellow emerging economy, India, arguing for gross concessions to a colonial past, even overlooking the impacts of some seventy-five years of their own industrialisation and burgeoning population growth; none of that talk will settle the bottom-line issue of getting a measured reduction in actual greenhouse gas volumes in the air.

The outside world notices new problems with an expansionist Chinese economy on a quest for resources, not least the "ask no questions" policy on trade and aid with insecure partners in Africa and elsewhere.

Grievously, the outside world has fears also of a lingering attachment to violent solutions, in Beijing, not least when watching the panting-fast pace of the arms build-up that the government there has ordered.

Chinese people unlike their European counterparts are hardly able to address these matters in free debate.

The news correspondents of 1989 would recognise the complaints of their colleagues working in China today, about the constraints on all information, especially free and public exchange of opinion among citizens – most symbolised by the holding-out of outside news media and the crippling of search activity on the Internet by the intervention of state agencies.

In such an environment, absence of free flow must likewise stimy the mobilsation of brainpower and other economic resources.

In Berlin people walk freely under the Brandengurg gate once walled off by the Wall; back and forth, sometimes, still, with an exaggeratedly deliberate gait.

In Beijing people take pictures at Tienanmen Square, and might wonder about how it was, twenty years before.

Memories stay, but we would all seem to be as blind to the immediate future as just before the events at those two places, at that time.

The initiative lies with the people, in the People's Republic of China; and none can say what history might produce -- whether the pattern of distaste, resentment and then overpowering contempt for tyranny as seen in Europe; or some other, perhaps entirely unexpected manifestation of change.